

Teachers Pressing for Quality Teaching



Lessons from Content Teachers of English Language Learners

Jack Dieckmann , M.A.

Some jobs, like teaching, might look simple from a distance. Teachers plan activities for their students, make copies of worksheets, keep track of grades and gold stars, plan a few field trips, and update their bulletin boards with every changing season. And of course, teachers make exciting plans for those long summer vacations.

Ask any teacher if this is an accurate picture of the life of a teacher. You will get a completely different perspective!

The core of teaching in schools involves a relationship among three elements: teachers, students and something to learn. That “something” is typically knowledge and skills to be mastered by students. More recently, that “something” has become a highly detailed and externally defined set of state content standards.

Because these elements seem obvious, teaching, as a practice, is often seen as solely technical and straightforward. It involves some compilation of instructional strategies, well-prepared lectures, perhaps a few hands-on activities and a classroom behavior management system.

Thus, to a casual observer, teaching just does not seem that hard. Explain things clearly and get the students ready for the state-mandated test. This simplistic view seems to underlie recent policy trends for softening the definition of what background a person needs to be certified to teach.

In contrast, researchers and reflective practitioners who have studied teaching are adding depth to help us understand the complexities of what it takes, on a daily basis, across a career, to be an *effective* teacher (Lampert, 2001).

But what does *effective* mean? Among some experts, it is common to hear “we know good teaching when we see it” but we have limited tools for developing the teacher competencies needed for effective practice. This is especially true for developing effective teaching practice for language-diverse learners.

Much of the national discussion has been about *teacher quality*, pointing to the level of university preparation, state credentialing and other individual characteristics of teachers. No doubt these are important to consider. But what seems missing from the dialogue is *quality teaching*.

School districts continue to provide teacher training, giving information to teachers about “best practices.” Most teachers are passive receivers of this knowledge, and little is known about when and how “best practices” are actually used in the classroom to engage in quality teaching.

This article reports on one of the many school partnerships that the Intercultural Development Research Association has established to create schools that work for all children. It takes many elements working together to create and maintain such schools. Here, we focus on quality

teaching, the heart of instructional practice.

Teachers Wrestling with Their Practice

Historically, much of the work done in professional development assumes that teachers need to be “fixed” and that they are singly responsible for the educational achievement gaps in schools today.

No doubt teachers can make a huge difference for students, but there are multiple, competing and sometimes contradictory priorities that teachers have to contend with. For example, teachers are expected to meet every student’s instructional need *while at the same time* keeping pace with a closely monitored page-by-page scope and sequence determined by central office. Teachers also must make instruction relevant every day to the wide range of students in the class *even though* the tightly prescribed curriculum has only the high-stakes test as its fundamental organizer and driving force.

Lest you think these are insurmountable barriers, many teachers are taking up the challenge of quality teaching, wrestling with the dilemmas together and getting results.

Here are the words of one teacher thinking about her practice, “I’m working hard every day to change my mindset and remember that my students have a lot to offer each other and should be allowed to direct their own learning.”

This is a self-developed goal from a teacher working with IDRA on an ongoing basis. The statement is remarkable in several ways. It illustrates a teacher’s actions to increase the quality in her teaching.

Her comment reveals a dissonance between an old mindset and an emerging one about what students bring to the learning context. The teacher consciously is trying to re-pattern her fundamental beliefs and practices daily with the new premise “that students have a lot to offer.”

This statement, if acted upon genuinely, has tremendous potential for re-configuring the relationships among teacher, students and learning tasks. The teacher is not simply stating a platitude, but has already determined an outcome for her students that they “should be allowed to direct their own learning.”

Even though the teacher assumes the challenge of rethinking her practices and keeping old habits at bay, we must remember that she also must contend with institutional forces that maintain the status quo. These factors are discussed in more detail elsewhere in other articles (Dieckmann and Montemayor, 2004).

ExCELS Teachers

What type of professional learning experiences lead to this kind of intense teacher commitment, as seen in this teacher’s statement, to value all students even when it challenges established teaching patterns? Why do we not see, generally, this kind of renewal even though teachers attend many interesting workshops with good information? We can look at ExCELS,

one of IDRA's ongoing professional development projects for some key insights.*

ExCELS supports and coaches secondary teachers as partners in targeted school reform. A central project question is, "How might classroom teachers initiate and sustain moves in their practice (to include planning, instruction, assessment, and parent engagement) toward increasing quality for English language learners?" ExCELS explores and documents the implications for those who support teacher development.

To examine this question, we draw on IDRA's ExCELS project, a five-year professional development project for teachers of English language learners. We focus on recurring individual teacher goal-setting, classroom action and joint reflection for their practice across a three-year period.

From this, we gain insight into how teachers view their practice, students, parents and subject knowledge. The insights inform both the problems and possibilities. They also help document the processes whereby teachers define for themselves what quality teaching means.

Throughout the life of the ExCELS project, we have documented critical efforts and incidences in teacher training (Dieckmann, August 2003), classroom demonstrations (Dieckmann, March 2003; Dieckmann, May 2003), and parent partnerships for learning (McCollum, 2003). Teachers gain professional knowledge and support in improving their practice through summer institutes, peer observations, Saturday sessions and parent-student-teacher conversations.

As the project has progressed, teachers have increased in leadership in substantive and practical ways: taking responsibility for project logistics (communication, calendar planning, recruitment), co-constructing the agendas, sharing more openly about the dilemmas and successes in practice, and ultimately using the team meetings as a context to problem-solve as a group to increase the quality of their teaching.

Teacher Goal-Setting

Throughout our community-building work with teachers, we have asked them to develop individual teaching goals for English language learners. Teachers wrote and shared about their problems, attempts and successes in their practice in a variety of formats, including through e-mail, individual conferences with project staff, campus and content groupwork sessions, at-large project meetings, parent-teacher-student dialogues, and ongoing conversations with teacher peers.

One teacher shared her experiences with the project at the Texas state parent conference last year. The participants in the session were excited because they were given transcripts of what teachers, parents and students actually said about the event.

Many teachers form goals for a variety of reasons. Some form individual goals about improving their teaching, for example, "This year, I want to try more collaborative learning."

More and more, teacher goals are moving toward achievement rates, such as, "This year, my goal is to have 80 percent mastery on the state test."

A few teachers engage in goal-setting as part of an annual teacher evaluation process, where

administrators check up on teachers to track their progress on goals.

Each of these approaches serves a useful function. We distinguish our work in ExCELS from these in that we are helping teachers define individually, and refine jointly, their goals for themselves, based on a common principle of valuing students and providing resources to teachers to help them improve their teaching.

The [box below](#) contains excerpts from ExCELS teacher goals across three years.

A brief thematic analysis of the teachers' goals points to some of the adjustments teachers made in their thinking and in their teaching. The content of ExCELS teacher training has remained fairly stable, revolving around the major tenets of sheltered instruction: motivating tasks, cooperative learning, comprehensible input, building language skills and higher-order thinking skills. Our data set includes many elements such as field notes, e-mails, sidebar conversation, meeting notes, teacher reflection forms, evaluation and teacher lesson plans.

The excerpts show the ways in which teachers' development became evident in the self-directed goals they choose to formulate. Over time, we see major shifts in teacher thinking in several areas: how they see themselves, how they see students and families, and how they see their content. In particular, we find clues about how teachers identify quality teaching issues in their teaching and how the complexity of that assessment develops over time.

The major indicators of teachers' moving toward quality teaching are:

- Moving *from* seeing students as being deficient *to* seeing students as having a wealth of individual experiences and informal knowledge that can be used to accelerate the mastery of rigorous content.
- Moving *from* general and vague ideas about “reconstructing” content and incorporating English as a second language techniques *to* becoming very specific and using concrete tools for complex instruction.
- Moving *from* using instructional strategies as the driver *to* using and adapting strategies at the service of English language learners to develop independent learners.

Enlisting Teachers in Helping to Understand and Achieve Quality Teaching

Part of the success that ExCELS has had in engaging teachers to direct their own professional learning and practice is our recognition that we are working with caring and hard-working adults who want to do their best and who give a high priority to student achievement that results from their teaching. Our multi-year commitment to the participating campuses has allowed for two-way communication and interaction as teachers help shape the particular learning opportunities for classroom effectiveness.

In our experience of the process of supporting quality teaching through professional development, three major elements have facilitated the shifts we see in teachers' thinking and practice as evidenced in teacher goals, classroom observations, and other data sources:

- Ongoing communication with peers and skilled coaches about what is and what is not working with students,
- Individual reflection on and refinement of classroom practice that is shared with peers

- and others in a supportive setting, and
- Commitment of support and resources to create synergy among teachers. School leaders and those who support teacher learning can benefit from the experiences in ExCELS by including teachers in a meaningful way in the ongoing conversations about what quality teaching looks like, and equally as important is how to get there together. This article has outlined some of the insights from looking at teachers' goals over time and the conditions that we see as facilitating the long road toward quality teaching. Teachers can help us map out the journey.

** ExCELS is an innovative IDRA professional development program that creates learning communities of schools, families and communities for English language learners' academic success. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the project is focusing on improving teachers' capacity to address curriculum, instruction, assessment and parent involvement issues that impact the achievement of English language learners. Now in its third year of implementation, the project includes a total of 54 core content teachers (math, science, language arts and social studies) across two secondary schools. For more information contact IDRA at 210-444-1710 or feedback@idra.org.*

Resources

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	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Moving from seeing students as deficient to seeing students as having a wealth of individual experiences	• Figure out how to motivate learners • Use data to see what my students' do not know • Involve parents in their child's education • Plan a cultural festival to engage students	• Develop lessons that reflect the interests of my students • Provide a more relaxed, structured, fun and challenging learning atmosphere • Get rid of my "high school" mentality that too many "A's" mean my course is not rigorous	• Develop more knowledge of students' background and interests • Help students verbalize their learning goals and personal achievements • Develop students' ability to take charge of their own learning and express themselves verbally
Moving from general to very specific teaching actions	• Learn "what to do" with non-English speaking students • Learn about Hispanic and Cambodian cultures • Work on an activity for the cultural festival	• Focus on teaching cognates and figurative language through visuals and Tejano music • Communicate better with my English language learners	• Give students more opportunities to evaluate their own learning and express themselves • Concentrate on providing activities for students to verbally contribute
Moving from using strategies as the driver to using strategies at the service of learners	• Use more vocabulary activities and graphic organizers • Use "book talk" at least once every nine weeks • Use reciprocal teaching at least once a semester	• Use and manage more successful group activities to develop concepts and language • My teaching style is too teacher-centered and teacher-directed	• Design instruction to include cooperative learning and active practice with new information • Include more cooperative learning, build self-efficacy and provide opportunities for success
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